

already accepted evacuee students. The children and all the schools that accepted such students, without knowing how or when they would get funding deserve our support.

I voted against the Ensign-Santorum amendment that sought to change the Enzi-Kennedy bill into a direct voucher program. It would have removed the carefully negotiated provisions designed to maintain the basic civil rights protections in the underlying education package. This legislation, in my view, merely provides a one time emergency financial grant to the schools and communities that opened their doors and classrooms to evacuee students following such an historic disaster.

Mr. COBURN. Mr. President, I thank the leadership for giving me an opportunity to express some concerns with the version of "value-based purchasing" for physicians in the Medicare program, as presented in the Senate reconciliation legislation. While I commend the committee's efforts in finding budget off-sets to stop the Medicare payment cuts facing physicians next year I believe the committee, and Congress as a whole, has accepted the idea of "value-based purchasing" with little discussion, vetting and evidence that it will actually do what people say it will do.

We have a big problem in the Medicare system. Our physicians, the bread and butter of the Medicare program who provide millions of services each year to Medicare beneficiaries, are facing unprecedented cuts in their reimbursement at a time when their own costs are skyrocketing. We have known about this problem for years, have taken action to prevent previously scheduled cuts and once again we must take action this year to prevent more cuts. I commend the Senate Finance Committee's efforts for at least preventing these cuts for a year and recommending that physicians receive a modest one percent increase instead of a 4.4 percent cut. I know the physician community is grateful for this effort in a time of budget deficits, hurricanes and other problems.

I am concerned about another provision included in the bill—specifically, value-based purchasing, a.k.a. "pay-for-performance." My concern is that this concept is not ready to be codified and be taken to prime-time. In the last decade, we have already declared two Medicare physician payment systems—the current sustainable growth rate formula and the volume performance standard—dysfunctional and unworkable. I do not see the value of diving so quickly into adding a new, untested and unproven system on top of an already declared disaster—the sustainable growth rate or "SGR."

As a physician, I can attest that most doctors are dedicated to improving the quality of care they provide their patients. The concept of continuing medical education and continuous quality improvement is engrained

in our medical culture. For years, physicians have been involved in peer review, the development of clinical guidelines and best practices, and outcome measurement. The concept of value-based purchasing is to turn these practices into a payment system that pays higher performers more and pays less to those who cannot make the grade. In theory, this has great promise and I believe it will improve the quality of care provided to all Medicare beneficiaries while increasing efficiency in the system.

However, I am concerned that the language included in S. 1932, the "Deficit Reduction Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 2005" will not achieve these goals. While it does give physicians a 1 percent update for 2006, it does not address the impending cuts scheduled for January 1, 2007. The proposed legislation does not fix the SGR, it instead places cuts on top of cuts, and infuses a system that mandates greater volume on top of one that penalizes physicians for volume increases. Value-based purchasing and the SGR are not compatible and cannot work together. In exchange for a one percent increase in 2006, physicians could receive cuts of up to 7.5 percent in 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011. If you think your physician constituents are frustrated now, wait until they understand this.

Under the suggested program, some physicians may have the opportunity to earn back that additional two percent cut if they meet specific "quality" and/or "efficiency" measures. Many of these measures have not yet been developed, have not yet been vetted by consensus building groups like the National Quality Forum and may or may not be evidenced-based. Before there is value-based purchasing, there must be agreed upon, comprehensive quality and efficiency measures for each medical specialty developed by the specialties themselves. In this proposed legislation, bureaucrats in Baltimore would primarily develop the measures that physicians across the country—with limited input from the physician and specialist community. I can tell you as a doctor that I am not interested in having some bureaucrat in Baltimore tell me how to deliver a baby in Muskogee, OK, and my patients are not either. Physicians must be the ones to develop these measures if they are going to be held accountable and if it is really going to improve quality and not just be another layer of paperwork and bureaucratic administration.

I believe pay-for-performance is critical to improving quality in our healthcare system. But we must get it right. Our physicians are facing year after year of cuts and beneficiaries are facing a loss of access to the physicians they know and trust. I believe the correct course is to deliberately and methodically build up toward a new physician payment system that accurately accounts for the cost in providing care to beneficiaries while encouraging and rewarding high quality and improvement.

Mr. DODD. Mr. President, I rise today to express my opposition to the spending reconciliation bill, which has been misleadingly titled the "Deficit Reduction Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 2005." As some of my colleagues have mentioned, the spending bill before us today is only one-third of the budget reconciliation picture—the other two pieces are a tax cut bill and a bill to increase the debt limit. Taken together, this package of reconciliation legislation would increase the budget deficit and impose greater costs on some of the most vulnerable members of our society. It would also allow for drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, which would be environmentally damaging and do nothing to reduce our dependence on foreign oil. The bill fails to reflect the priorities of the people of our nation and it fails to seriously address the major challenges we face as a Nation.

We are living today in an increasingly global society, one that presents tremendous opportunities. But with those opportunities come challenges. Today, countries like China and India are becoming increasingly desirable for venture capitalists interested in investment, for students interested in higher education, and for companies interested in labor that is not only inexpensive but well-educated and well-trained, too. With economic development and expansion have come greater competitive pressures.

Our labor market is under strain—real wages are stagnating, health care is becoming increasingly unaffordable, and pension benefits are being eroded and cut. The science and math scores of our high school seniors are at the bottom of the pack of industrialized nations. And we are the only nation in the developed world where literacy levels of older adults are higher than those of young adults.

Our Nation faces a choice. Are the administration and Congress going to respond to new challenges in a sensible and progressive way or will they continue to ignore the facts and adhere to policies that have brought Americans higher deficits, higher unemployment, and lower incomes? Will they continue to hold to the primitive philosophy that lower taxes on the most affluent, higher taxes on everyone else, and less investment in education, research, and business growth will somehow magically restore us to our place of economic preeminence in the world?

This view is naive and betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of our history. Our economic success has not been achieved despite investments we made in our people, but because of them. The not-so-benign neglect that characterizes much of our current national economic policy is not a strategy for success. It's an excuse for complacency, and ultimately a recipe for mediocrity.

Regrettably, this reconciliation package continues failed policies that will only continue to erode our Nation's place in the world.